

# CROSSROADS

An interdisciplinary journal for the study  
of history, philosophy, religion and classics

SPECIAL ISSUE – 2011 PERSPECTIVES ON POWER CONFERENCE

VOLUME VI ISSUE II 2013

ISSN: 1833-878X

Pages 73-83

**Helen English**

*Musical Entertainment in Newcastle, New South Wales, in the 1870s: Audience  
Identity, Power and Cultural Ownership*

## ABSTRACT

In 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain, the expanding middle classes and their aspirations to distinction through cultural capital led to a change in the perception of cultural products and their status. The century witnessed extraordinary cultural growth and diversification, especially in musical works and activities. In this period there was a gradual separation between music perceived to be ‘art’ and that seen as ‘popular’. From the 1830s, supported by new upwardly mobile consumers, art music evolved greater complexity, whilst new popular forms and styles, such as opera fantasies, ballads and blackface minstrelsy, proliferated in counterbalance. Social groupings began to distinguish themselves through the kind of cultural products they preferred and in England the upper middle classes moved into positions of cultural leadership, for example running the Philharmonic Society of London and initiating the *Tonic Sol Fa* movement. This evolving cultural landscape with its potential for distinctions of taste, power and class was imported to Australia by successive waves of immigrants. This paper will show how Newcastle, New South Wales, resisted the transposition of such a hierarchy and how popular music and entertainment became mainstream, pushing high status music and theatre to the fringes.

## BIOGRAPHY

Since 2000, Helen English has been a lecturer in music at the University of Newcastle, after a performing career in the U. K. and Australia in opera and new music. She completed a Masters in 2006, focusing on the life and music of the tenor, Gerald English. Recent research has been into music making in Newcastle, N. S. W. She has a forthcoming book chapter in *A World of Popular Entertainments Conference Proceedings*, Callaghan, NSW (Scholar's Press, Cambridge).

## MUSICAL ENTERTAINMENT IN NEWCASTLE, NEW SOUTH WALES, IN THE 1870s: AUDIENCE IDENTITY, POWER AND CULTURAL OWNERSHIP

To the socially recognised hierarchy of the arts, and within each of them, of genres, schools or periods, corresponds a social hierarchy of the consumers.<sup>1</sup>

### INTRODUCTION

Commentators on nineteenth-century Britain refer to an explosion of cultural activity in the wake of industrialisation.<sup>2</sup> Music was said to be ubiquitous in England, infiltrating every aspect of society.<sup>3</sup> The people of the north of England, where industrialisation was most concentrated, were especially active in a diverse range of musical activities. The northern counties of Northumberland and Durham were centres for coal mining; for this reason, the New South Wales government and mining companies sought migrants from this region for settlement in the Hunter Valley coal-mining regions.<sup>4</sup> These migrants brought with them what Pierre Bourdieu refers to as 'cultural capital,' in the form of esteem for and the enjoyment of music.<sup>5</sup> In particular they brought the skills and preference for certain types of music, such as brass band music, hymns, ballads, music hall songs and instrumental variation form. They also brought social structures that allowed for self-improvement and the development of new skills.

This paper concerns Newcastle, N. S. W., in the period 1875-1877. This period is of interest because rapid population growth at this time produced an expansion in public entertainment, leading to increased commercialisation. In the mid 1870s, coal mines were booming, wages peaked and workers had recently gained shorter working days and a half-day holiday on Saturdays, giving them the means and time for leisure activities.<sup>6</sup> It was a period of change and fluidity, where Newcastle began to cohere as a city from township beginnings. Public entertainment sites expanded with the construction of a large theatre, the Victoria (on Perkins Street), and two smaller venues, the Newcastle and Wallsend Protestant halls, as well as the refurbishment of another smaller theatre, the Theatre Royal (on Watt Street).<sup>7</sup> The growth of musical entertainment and the forces that influenced this are examined from the perspective of Bourdieu's theories of class and taste in order to understand why certain musical styles and genres came to dominate the entertainment scene.

The popular newspapers from the 1870s help paint a picture of the musical scene in Newcastle during this period. The *Newcastle Pilot* was established as a weekly in October 1867 and ceased operating in March 1879. The *Newcastle Chronicle* ran from 1858, beginning as a weekly and graduating to a tri-weekly before closing down in July 1876. The *Miners' Advocate* was founded in Plattsburg, by John Miller Sweet, also growing from a weekly to a tri-weekly with a circulation of 4000 copies by 1876. In 1876, the *Miners' Advocate* moved to Newcastle where it was recreated as the *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*, the region's first daily paper. Prior to the establishment of a daily paper in 1876, the *Maitland Mercury* regularly reported on Newcastle events, often in more detail than the local Newcastle papers.

---

<sup>1</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: a Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, Richard Nice (trans.) (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), 1.

<sup>2</sup> William Weber, *Music and the Middle Classes: the Social Structure of Concert Life in London, Paris and Vienna between 1830 and 1848*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 19; Dave Russell, *Popular Music in England, 1840-1915: a Social History* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1987), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Weber, *Music and the Middle Classes*, 1; James Walvin, *Leisure and Society, 1830-1950* (New York: Longman, 1978), 97.

<sup>4</sup> James Docherty, *Newcastle: the Makings of an Australian City* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1983), 14.

<sup>5</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital" in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, John G. Richardson (Ed.) (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 243-6.

<sup>6</sup> Bob James, "Changing the Record: 19<sup>th</sup> Century Origins of the Labour Movement," in *Riverchange: Six New Histories of the Hunter*, Cynthia Hunter (Ed.) (Newcastle: Newcastle Region Library, 1998), 76-112.

<sup>7</sup> For more detail on the Victoria Theatre, Perkins St., see Helen English & Stephen Wye, "Musical Entertainment in Newcastle, 1876" in *A World of Popular Entertainments: An Edited Volume of Critical Essays*, Gillian Arrighi and Victor Emeljanow (Eds.) (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholar's Press, 2012), 207-220.

## HIGH AND LOW STATUS MUSIC EVENTS – THE SCENE IN ENGLAND

During the eighteenth century, British music programmes were intentionally varied. It was common for ‘light’ music genres, such as the English glee or catch, to follow a more learned work, such as a string quartet or concerto movement.<sup>8</sup> However, this changed during the nineteenth century. The shift was in the perception of different types of music, which began to be linked to social status. Music became ‘musics’ (to use an ethnomusicology term), graded from low to highbrow. The concept of ‘popular,’ in opposition to ‘serious,’ art music developed during the century, being established by the 1890s.<sup>9</sup> However, as William Weber points out, the first indications of this process are seen in the 1830s and 1840s.<sup>10</sup> There were two main aspects to this development. First, older music by deceased composers such as Mozart, Haydn and Handel was being presented in concert series in London and Paris, such as the *Concerts of Antient Music*, London and the *Concerts Spirituel*, Paris.<sup>11</sup> Second, as sheet music publishing technologies improved, there were commercial opportunities in promoting music that was popular at the time, such as opera fantasies and ballads.<sup>12</sup>

The concept of great historical works and great living composers was promoted by musical idealists, like the composer Robert Schumann (1810-1856) in Germany, musicologist-composer François-Joseph Fétis (1784-1871) in France and music critic J. W. Davison (1813-1885) in Britain, who railed against the lowering of public taste through the promotion of ‘lesser’ works, such as virtuosic variations and opera fantasies.<sup>13</sup> The growth of the middle classes and their aspirations to high status cultural acquisition provided the impetus and finances for concert series, orchestras, new music publications and opera seasons.<sup>14</sup> High status series, such as that of the Philharmonic Society of London, which featured chamber and orchestral music, were necessarily expensive; at the same time, from the 1820s there was a middle-class movement to make ‘serious’ art music available to lower classes. This took the form of choral singing, wind, and then brass bands and promenade concerts.<sup>15</sup> The motivation for these ventures was largely middle-class concern about the occupation of working people’s leisure time.

Urbanisation had caused the loss of many traditional rural pastimes and the local pub became the preferred leisure destination.<sup>16</sup> The potential of music, with its socialising nature, was quickly seen and by the 1850s it was the ‘rational’ recreation favoured by the middle classes for promotion amongst the working and lower middle classes.<sup>17</sup> As class divisions hardened and leisure time increased for blue and white-collar workers, notions of respectability became an important issue.<sup>18</sup> High and lowbrow public amusements and entertainments were growing and diversifying.<sup>19</sup> Fear of losing one’s class identity in such public throngs through association with the uncouth, was motivation for promoting ‘rational’ recreations and curbs on public unruliness.<sup>20</sup> Respectability, which embraced such virtues as constraint, independence, moral rectitude and financial prudence, was a recurring theme and became a unifying ideal of Victorian England.

---

<sup>8</sup> William Weber, *The Great Transformation of Musical Taste: Concert Programming from Haydn to Brahms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 60-61.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Weber, *Music and the Middle Classes*, xxii-xxiii; and Derek B. Scott, *Sounds of the Metropolis: the Nineteenth Century Popular Music Revolution in London, Paris, and Vienna* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 1.

<sup>10</sup> Weber, *Music and the Middle Classes*, xxv-xxvi.

<sup>11</sup> These concert series in London and Paris were two of the first *public* concert series in Europe, both being founded in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>12</sup> Walvin, *Leisure and Society*, 108.

<sup>13</sup> Weber, *Music and the Middle Classes*, xxi. These three men were influential through their writings on music in publications including *Revue Musicale* (founded by Fétis in 1827) and *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung* (Leipzig, 1798-1848).

<sup>14</sup> For more information on concert series in London at this time see Weber, *Music and the Middle Classes*, 19-34.

<sup>15</sup> An example is the famous Black Dyke Mills band, still active today, that was established in 1855 by John Foster, after an earlier incarnation as a reed and brass band from 1815.

<sup>16</sup> Walvin, *Leisure*, 35-6.

<sup>17</sup> Russell, *Popular Music in England*, 18.

<sup>18</sup> In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century industrialised working hours were very long but by mid century most workers enjoyed a half-holiday on Saturdays and a ten-hour working day. See Walvin, *Leisure and Society*, 60.

<sup>19</sup> Examples of diverse entertainments were chamber music concerts, performances in singing saloons, minstrel shows and concerts of ballads.

<sup>20</sup> See: Peter Bailey, *Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 13-29.

In his book, *Distinction*, Bourdieu discusses the consumption of culture and the way in which sections of society are distinguished from each other through the cultural products they read, listen to, look at or buy. Bourdieu states:

The different fractions of class distinguish themselves precisely through that which makes them members of the class as a whole – namely the type of capital which is the source of their privilege and the different manners of asserting their distinction which are linked to it.<sup>21</sup>

Bourdieu argues that taste – something acquired through upbringing and education – is a marker of class. The aesthetic enjoyment of a work of art is based on the ability to ‘decode’ it, which in turn is derived from access to specialised knowledge through education, and marks off the consumer as privileged.<sup>22</sup> During the nineteenth century, the middle classes increasingly appropriated what had been upper-class cultural domains, including high status concerts.<sup>23</sup> Audience behaviour also changed from a relaxed eighteenth century style, where talking and moving around were the norm, to restrained silent listening.<sup>24</sup> High status entertainment was not readily accessible to working and lower middle classes either financially or intellectually (the latter because they lacked the education to ‘decode’ the music).<sup>25</sup> However, because middle class reformers were promoting choral art music for workers’ choirs and orchestral repertoire in people’s concerts, it became important to distinguish or mark off working-class music making. This was demonstrated by the *Yorkshire Orchestra* in 1868: ‘Our bandsmen are all mechanics – some of them, no doubt fine specimens of humanity ... but lacking refinement of feeling or the ability to become efficient musicians.’<sup>26</sup>

The brass band movement became a self-sufficient working-class pursuit. Choral unions and the massed choral performances, favoured by the Victorians, were mixed socially (working and lower middle classes mainly sang, whilst higher classes were involved in their organisation). In parallel with such an uplifting and ‘rational’ pursuit, the places seen as immoral – that is, the pubs – were introducing their own vocal entertainment, initially in singing saloons.<sup>27</sup> The popularity of these saloons led some pub managers to take the next step and set up venues where entertainment was the focus. These were called music halls in an attempt to lend a serious tone to the venues and escape censure from middle class reformists.<sup>28</sup>

Music halls became another hugely successful Victorian venture. During the nineteenth century, they gradually evolved from noisy sites of interaction between audience and performers, where the audience was seated at tables, eating and drinking, to a more respectable replica of the concert hall or theatre with rows of seats, two shows nightly, and a quiet and attentive audience. In spite of its eventual gentrification, the music hall show was essentially a working-class entertainment, evolved from the public house and driven by its relevance to a predominately working-class audience.<sup>29</sup> The music hall style and the singers who became stars created a new culture ‘of the people’ and became, in a sense, the new urban folk music.<sup>30</sup> Performers, at least early on, were often virtuosic, improvising songs on current topics and creating characters, which became a feature of the halls. Newcastle upon Tyne in England had two music halls in the 1870s – the Victoria and the Oxford.<sup>31</sup> Earlier, in the 1860s, it had been a leading provincial centre for music hall song writing and singing and many of these songs would have come across with migrants to the other ‘coaly’ Newcastle in N. S. W.<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 258.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv.

<sup>23</sup> Weber, *Music and the Middle Classes*, 71.

<sup>24</sup> Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2002), 206-7.

<sup>25</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction*, xxv.

<sup>26</sup> Cited in Russell, *Popular Music in England*, 4. The *Yorkshire Orchestra* was a musical periodical started by William Shepherdson, which closed down after only a year (see William Shepherdson Obituary, *Driffild Times*, October 25, 1884).

<sup>27</sup> Brad Beaven, *Leisure, Citizenship and Working-Class Men in Britain, 1850-1945* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 53.

<sup>28</sup> Dagmar Kift, *The Victorian Music Hall: Culture, Class and Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 20.

<sup>29</sup> Peter Bailey, *Music Hall: the Business of Pleasure* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986), 75.

<sup>30</sup> Henry Raynor, *Music and Society since 1815* (New York: Schoken Books, 1976), 151.

<sup>31</sup> An Oxford Music hall was active briefly in Newcastle, N. S. W., during the 1880s.

<sup>32</sup> Kathleen Barker, “The Performing Arts in Newcastle upon Tyne, 1840-70” in *Leisure in England, 1790-1939*, John K. Walton and James Walvin (Eds.), (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983), 64.

## THE SCENE IN NEWCASTLE

Newcastle society in the 1870s was predominantly composed of English immigrants, a fact that is noticeable in the names of places such as Newcastle itself and the two local counties of Northumberland and Durham. There was a higher proportion of English immigrants in the Newcastle region than elsewhere in N. S. W., and of this migrant group, a large number came from the coal-mining Northumberland/Durham region of England, where the leading city was Newcastle upon Tyne (see Table 1).<sup>33</sup> Other migrant groups were from Scotland, Wales and Ireland. During the 1870s, the British demographic was boosted by successive waves of immigrants from Great Britain who brought new cultural practices from a rapidly changing home environment. The culture of the Newcastle region – that is, the beliefs, customs, traditions and practices – was therefore drawn from these cultural origins.<sup>34</sup> There was a large presence of non-conformist churches, such as Methodist, Congregational and Presbyterian, and a notably significant proportion of Primitive Methodists, only found at that time in Staffordshire, Durham and Northumberland in Britain.<sup>35</sup> Some of the earliest Australian unions were founded in the mining townships of the Newcastle region, and miners' lodges, Friendly and Temperance societies were established, as in Britain.<sup>36</sup> The different ethnic groups kept up many of their traditional practices and these were also reflected in holiday amusements - examples being the Caledonian Games, Eisteddfods and St Patrick's Day celebrations.

**Table 1**

Population statistics for the Newcastle region

---

1871 94% of colonial population were of British descent  
1871 44% English migrants came from Northumberland/Durham  
1871 British born 45% compared to 35% for rest of N. S. W.

---

In her thesis, "The Newcastle Coalmining District of New South Wales, 1860-1900", Ellen McEwen established the social hierarchy of the region, ranging from professionals and people of independent means at the top to unskilled labourers at the bottom.<sup>37</sup> In 1871, miners and labourers made up 76% of the population; together with working foremen and tradesmen this gave a total of 85% who were manual workers. The next largest group were shopkeepers, publicans and agents who together made up 11%. Professionals were only 2% and clerks and shop assistants 1%. This was similar to Newcastle upon Tyne, England, in the 1870s where skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers made up 82%, managers 17% and professionals 1%.<sup>38</sup> These statistics for the two Newcastles represent high levels of working class when compared to 77% as an average for England at this time.<sup>39</sup>

Occasional musical activities in Newcastle, N. S. W., are chronicled from the 1840s in the *Maitland Mercury*.<sup>40</sup> The 1850s gold rushes caused Newcastle's population to dip, but during the 1860s the population grew substantially, following the establishment of settlements at Waratah, Wallsend and Lambton from the late

---

<sup>33</sup> Docherty, *Newcastle*, 21; Table sourced from: Ellen McEwen, "The Newcastle Coalmining District of New South Wales, 1860-1900," (PhD diss., University of Sydney, 1979), 12-13.

<sup>34</sup> The predominance of British culture in the Newcastle region is commented on by both Docherty (*Newcastle*, 21) and Lucas ("Hear my Song", 150). Docherty: 'During the last half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Newcastle emerged as an unusual example of a transplanted British community' and Lucas: 'these religious, social and political characteristics of working-class English culture were transplanted to the Hunter region with a significance not paralleled in other regions of New South Wales'.

<sup>35</sup> Docherty, *Newcastle*, 15. For discussion of Methodism, including Primitive Methodism, in the Hunter, see Andrew Metcalfe, *For Freedom and Dignity: Historical Agency and Class Structures in the Coalfields of N. S. W.* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1988), 91-99.

<sup>36</sup> For more on Temperance Societies in the Newcastle region, see Jennifer Maria Sloggett, "Temperance and Class: with particular reference to Newcastle and the South Maitland Coalfields, 1860-1928" (PhD diss., University of Newcastle, 1989).

<sup>37</sup> McEwen, "The Newcastle Coalmining District", 16.

<sup>38</sup> Humphrey Southall, 2009, *A Vision of Britain through Time*. <http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/index.jsp> Accessed 23.6.12.

<sup>39</sup> John Benson, *The Working Class in Britain, 1850-1939* (London: Longman, 1989), 4.

<sup>40</sup> See, for example, *Maitland Mercury* (MM) "Newcastle Philharmonic Society", 1 July 1846, 1.

1850s.<sup>41</sup> Cultural activities increased, including the formation of various musical associations and performance groups. By the 1870s in Newcastle, there were a number of different types of public entertainment. In addition to concerts, many theatrical entertainments had substantial musical content. This is clear from advertisements and reviews, such as the 1875 Holloway theatrical season for which an orchestra is advertised at every performance.<sup>42</sup> Variety and minstrel shows were permeated with music, relying heavily on vocal items and dance music.<sup>43</sup> These entertainments and concerts may be conveniently divided into those provided by locals and those by visiting performers. Local performers were largely amateur with a small number of professionals taking leading roles. They appeared in brass bands, choirs, minstrel troupes and as soloists or in small ensembles.<sup>44</sup> As in many Australian towns and cities, music was also performed and heard at churches, sport days, concerts in the open air, picnics and excursions, soirées and teas, benefit concerts, choral concerts, dances and parades.<sup>45</sup> In addition, Newcastle residents had the opportunity to hear visiting performers from Sydney and further afield.<sup>46</sup> National and international performers toured the towns and cities of Australia, disseminating new styles, genres and performance practices whose origins were most often Great Britain or the U. S. A. International touring individuals and groups, travelling a circuit that could take in India, Hong Kong, Singapore, New Zealand, U. S. A. and Great Britain, who visited Newcastle in this period include the pianist Arabella Goddard, musical entertainers Grace Egerton and George Case, cornet player Jules Levy and the vocal troupe, Salsbury's Troubadours.<sup>47</sup>

It is hard to estimate the success of the outdoor events, since they took place on public holidays, such as the Prince of Wales birthday or the Saturday half-holidays, when there were also other attractions. Of the indoor events, it would seem that 'Monster' or 'Grand' benefit concerts were the most popular.<sup>48</sup> They appeared with regularity during the years 1874-1877 and featured a variety of items such as ballads, comic songs (often from the music hall), instrumental solos and recitations.<sup>49</sup> An overture, performed by piano, small ensemble or brass band usually opened each programme half. Such a miscellany was common in England in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but was later frowned on as 'low taste' by middle-class musical idealists.<sup>50</sup> The use of overtures as a way of framing sections of a concert programme is of interest. They were commonly used in eighteenth century programmes and this tradition was carried on in these 'Grand' concerts as well as in blackface minstrel and music hall shows in England and Australia in the latter part of the nineteenth century. The performers in the benefit concerts were all local, some of them singled out repeatedly by the papers for praise – Mrs Parker, the Welsh soprano, Mr Hanley, the violinist and Mr Storey, the comic vocalist are examples.<sup>51</sup> Vocal repertoire was predominately English with the inclusion of some Scottish, Welsh and Irish folksongs. As elsewhere in Australia, the ballad was very popular, a form associated with the home and domesticity.<sup>52</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup> Maurice Daly, *The Growth of Newcastle and its Suburbs* (Newcastle: N. S. W., Hunter Valley Research Foundation, 1966), 5-12.

<sup>42</sup> See, for example *Newcastle Chronicle* (NC), 5 August 1875, 2.

<sup>43</sup> Clayton W. Henderson, "Minstrelsy, American" in *Grove Music Online*. *Oxford Music Online*, <http://0-www.oxfordmusiconline.com.library.newcastle.edu.au/subscriber/article/grove/music/18749> Accessed August 7, 2012.

<sup>44</sup> See English & Wye, "Musical Entertainment in Newcastle", 210.

<sup>45</sup> John Whiteoak, "Popular music" in *Currency Companion to Music and Dance in Australia*, Aline Scott-Maxwell and John Whiteoak (Eds.) (Sydney: Currency Press, 2003), 529; McEwen, "The Newcastle Coalmining District", 203-4.

<sup>46</sup> English & Wye, "Musical Entertainment in Newcastle", 211-212.

<sup>47</sup> NC, "City Hall, Newcastle", 28 June, 1873, 1; NC, "Grace Egerton", 9 October, 1875, 5; *Newcastle Morning Herald* (NMH), "Two Grand Concerts of Levy", 27 February, 1877, 3; NMH, "Victoria Theatre – Salsbury Troubadours", 13 September, 1877, 2.

<sup>48</sup> The term 'Monster' was common in this period as was 'Grand' for a concert with a number of performers and works. Such benefit concerts were customary in Australia in this period, see, for example, Anne Doggett "And for Harmony Most Ardently We Long": Musical Life in Ballarat, 1851-71", (PhD thesis, University of Ballarat, 2006), 281-283.

<sup>49</sup> An example of the programming of a music hall song is *Mercenary Jane* by Alfred Lee performed by Mr Storey, NC, 8 January 1875, 3.

<sup>50</sup> William Weber, *The Great Transformation of Musical Taste: Concert Programming from Haydn to Brahms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 1-5.

<sup>51</sup> See, for example, *Miners' Advocate* (MA) "Grand Concert", 4 March 1876, 3.

<sup>52</sup> Roger Covell, *Australia's Music: Themes of a New Society* (Melbourne: Sun Books, 1967), 23.

Brass bands were well established in the region by the 1870s, as in many Australian towns and cities, and were frequently to be found ‘enlivening a dull piece of coal and scrub’ with their very audible practice sessions.<sup>53</sup> As Mark Pinner has noted in his thesis, “A History of Brass Bands in New South Wales, 1788-1901,” there was a strong connection between the collieries, their unions and brass bands in the North of England and the same connection was to found in the Newcastle region.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, during this period, brass band activity was flourishing in Newcastle, in contrast with Sydney.<sup>55</sup> The usefulness of this rational pursuit as a means of keeping people busy and away from the pubs is articulated in the *Newcastle Chronicle*: ‘The band ... numbers thirteen members, chiefly youths ... in the practice of a very refining and elevating pursuit ...’<sup>56</sup> The beneficial purpose of the band, seen through the gaze of the paper, is then underlined in the ensuing paragraph: ‘The Young Men’s Christian Association is also making very good headway and forms another way of refining and instructing the minds of the young men of the township’.<sup>57</sup>

The ‘Sacred and Secular’ concerts featured the local choirs – notably the Choral Unions at Wallsend and Lambton. Churches also had choirs and these groups performed at social gatherings.<sup>58</sup> The Choral Unions were the only local ensembles presenting works that English musical idealists would have seen as serious – by composers such as Haydn, Handel and Mendelssohn.<sup>59</sup> Such music societies were likely to have been patronised by the region’s middle classes, fitting in with notions of discernment of taste. Newspaper reportage indicates that they had mixed success in audience numbers.<sup>60</sup> There is also evidence that there were efforts to run other middle-class societies locally that were found in England, such as a Philharmonic Society and People’s concert series.<sup>61</sup> However, these lapsed after an initial series.

In general, vocal items made up the largest part of local music-making, being found in choral concerts, ‘Monster’ concerts and minstrel shows, and reflected the singing tradition that was widespread in England.<sup>62</sup> Table 2 shows the reported numbers of performances by different soloists and ensembles during 1875. The very high number of brass band appearances is accounted for by their presence at all holiday activities (races, excursions, picnics and dances), as well as all significant events (openings of new buildings, marches and processions).

**Table 2**

Local performances in 1875 in Newcastle, N. S. W. and its townships, as reported in the newspapers

Type	Number
Brass Band	45
String Band	10
Solo Vocalist/Instrumentalist	24
Choir	11
Minstrels	3

National and international touring performers came to the region from the 1840s, when Maitland was the leading city in the Hunter Valley. In Newcastle in the early nineteenth century, any visiting performers had to

<sup>53</sup> *NC*, 22 June 1875, 3 and see John Whiteoak, “‘Pity the Bandless Towns’: Brass Banding in Australian Rural Communities before World War Two” in *Rural Society*, 13: 3 (2003), 287-311.

<sup>54</sup> Mark Pinner “A History of Brass Bands in New South Wales, 1788-1901” (MA diss., Macquarie University, 2004), 98.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 97-98.

<sup>56</sup> *NC*, “Waratah”, 22 June 1875, 3.

<sup>57</sup> Extract from the second report, *NC*, 22 June 1875, 3.

<sup>58</sup> See, for example, “Grand Sacred Concert”, *NC*, 4 March 1871, 1 and “A Grand Sacred and Secular Concert”, *NMH*, 6 July, 1876, 3.

<sup>59</sup> See *NMH*, 6 July 1876, 3; *NMH*, 4 November 1876, 5.

<sup>60</sup> See, for example, *NMH*, 10 November 1876, 2 and *NMH*, 27 November 1876, 3: ‘it appears that after two attempts our Choral Union have failed to get an audience in a Newcastle’.

<sup>61</sup> See *MM*, 11 July 1846, 2 and 12 August 1846, 2.

<sup>62</sup> Non-conformist churches had introduced congregational singing in England from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, paving the way for the later 19<sup>th</sup> century choral movements in England and Australia.



use the Courthouse, as there was no other suitable venue.<sup>63</sup> In the 1850s, a vacant building on Hunter Street was converted into a theatre next to the Commercial Hotel. There was quite a range of entertainment presented there – from a one-man wizard show to Shakespeare.<sup>64</sup> Another theatre, the Royal (on Watt Street), was established in 1859/1860, seating 400 with a gallery, private boxes and an orchestra pit.<sup>65</sup> In 1875, the Holloways, an actor-manager couple, took on the lease and presented rapidly changing seasons of plays, always with musical contributions from an orchestra, led by Messers F. and R. Croft, on violin and piano respectively. Other visiting artists were: a female wizard, a music hall act from London, minstrel and variety troupes from Sydney and trapeze artists from Britain.<sup>66</sup> In 1876, the performance scene changed when the new Victoria Theatre opened in Perkins Street, seating 1,300 people.<sup>67</sup> In the same year, two Protestant halls opened – one in Wallsend and one in Newcastle. There were now much better facilities and choice of venues for visiting performers. There was also greater financial risk, especially for a theatre seating three times the number of the Royal, and also for halls competing for the same audience.

In 1871 the population of Newcastle, including the surrounding townships, was about 16,000.<sup>68</sup> Over the next decade this rose to 24,000.<sup>69</sup> In the absence of more precise figures, one can estimate it to have been around 20,000 in 1876. During this year the Victoria presented a show every day – a full house of 1,300 spectators meant that 6.5% of the population were present – and in any week, there were at least six performances. It is clear from these figures that large numbers of miners and the labouring classes must have attended, as well as the middle classes, who accounted for only 15% of the population.<sup>70</sup> There was therefore the opportunity for tension between the fashionable audience members drawn from the upper social levels and the potentially disreputable workers. Local newspapers helped readers ascertain whether the entertainments on offer were suitable for the ‘elite’ of Newcastle and their families. It was also encouraging to find that any unwonted behaviour was dealt with swiftly and with authority.<sup>71</sup> The *Newcastle Morning Herald* observed:

The occupants of the front row of seats were not content with sitting down to see the play, but stood up, apparently dissatisfied. Moral suasion apparently having no effect ... Mr B N Jones stepped in front of the footlights and in a quiet yet determined voice informed the hilarious disturbers that unless there was a cessation of hostilities the curtain would be dropped until peace was restored. This well timed announcement was warmly applauded by the audience and had the desired effect ...<sup>72</sup>

The disproportionate size of the working-class population presented considerable obstacles to the upper and middle class presumption of cultural leadership. This is reflected in the papers by comments about the lack of ‘legitimate’ drama, respectability, unsatisfactory venues, pianos and audiences and reproaches for poor attendance at the Choral Union concerts. The connection between cultural taste and class is demonstrated in the following newspaper commentary, where the good taste of the audience is praised: ‘... very large and respectable audience, who manifested, by their repeated plaudits, the excellence of the music’.<sup>73</sup>

After the Victoria was built, its manager, John Bennett, was able to negotiate for the last trains of the day to wait until the end of the shows in order to convey audience members back to the mining townships.<sup>74</sup> Miners and their families were now the main consumers of the theatre’s entertainment and this led to programming changes. The smaller Theatre Royal had been able to mix serious ‘legitimate’ drama into a season offering mainly lighter

<sup>63</sup> See, for example, *MM*, “Newcastle Philharmonic Society”, 24 June, 1846, 3.

<sup>64</sup> W. J. Goold “The Amusements of Newcastle,” *The Newcastle and Hunter District Historical Society Monthly Journal*, 9:9 (1955), 130.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>66</sup> The music hall act comprised Grace Egerton and George Case, who premiered the English song “Down in a Coal Mine”, ‘peculiarly adapted for this part of the colony’ on 7 October 1875 at the City Hall, see *NC*, 7 October 1875, 1.

<sup>67</sup> *NMH*, “Victoria Theatre – Opening Night”, 19 April 1876, 2.

<sup>68</sup> Daly, *The Growth of Newcastle*, 14-15.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>70</sup> McEwen, “The Newcastle Coalmining District of New South Wales,” 15-16.

<sup>71</sup> Heckling and other forms of vocal interaction were common in Australian audiences in earlier decades.

However, elsewhere in Australia high and lowbrow audiences were becoming more distinct in this period. See Whiteoak “Popular music,” 529.

<sup>72</sup> *NMH*, “Victoria Theatre”, 19 April 1876, 2.

<sup>73</sup> *NC*, “Herr Becker’s Concert”, 22 May 1875, 3.

<sup>74</sup> *NMH*, “Victoria Theatre”, 11 May 1876, 3. ‘... Mr Bennett is making arrangements to run a special train for the convenience of the Wallsend people ...’.

drama and variety, allowing for different audiences for different status events. The considerably larger Victoria's first season of Shakespeare failed in 1876 and was rapidly closed, not to be repeated during that year. The small portion of the population that enjoyed 'legitimate' theatre had to make the best of sensational drama like *Buffalo Bill* or minstrel shows from the U. S. A. In Britain, Newcastle upon Tyne's Theatre Royal had offered Shakespeare and at least one season of opera every year; however its seating capacity of 1,900 represented just 1.5% of the population - then 130,000.<sup>75</sup>

Miners were involved as members of the various cultural societies and performance groups such as the choirs and musical societies.<sup>76</sup> McEwen concluded that, whilst there was a trend later in the century towards distancing from the management level, in the period discussed, there was mingling through shared interests and resultant blurring of class boundaries.<sup>77</sup> At the same time, she posits that the roles within these groups, including participants, committee members and office-bearers, were assigned to different classes in a way that reinforced class distinctions.<sup>78</sup> McEwen's data certainly demonstrates a trend for the upper levels of society to take the roles of patrons and office-bearers, whilst the working men took on committee membership. However, these figures also show that there were representatives from working classes amongst the office-bearers and that committee membership included middle-class representatives. This points to identity formation through clubs and societies, traversing class boundaries, something that recent historians have commented on as increasingly important in the early nineteenth century.<sup>79</sup>

Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* – a 'set of basic, deeply interiorised master-patterns' – determines actions as an individual negotiates his/her way through 'a maze of constraints and opportunities that they grasp imperfectly through past experience and over time'.<sup>80</sup> *Habitus* can produce a self-defeating outlook from negative early social experiences. *Habitus* also can be innovative, as Bourdieu showed in his work with Algerian peasants, when creative invention may emerge from 'an experience and also a possession, a capital'.<sup>81</sup> English migrants who were willing to risk a new start in an unknown and very distant continent, were unlikely to be self-defeating. They looked, rather, for self-advancement.<sup>82</sup> In the case of Newcastle, N. S. W., they came with the right dispositions and brought with them religious and social organisations that provided the means and opportunity to do so. Self-improvement was a key focus of the non-conformist churches, which encouraged and supported their members to participate in committees, take on public speaking and move into positions of leadership.<sup>83</sup> Societies and lodges, such as the Protestant Alliance and Ancient Order of Foresters, were structured with pathways through graded ranks that signified achievement. While these organisations offered opportunities for social advancement, the disproportionately large working-class population in the area meant that it was more likely for middle-class men to marry women socially 'beneath' them, than the reverse.<sup>84</sup> In fact, the mining community was a very cohesive group, held together by strong family and geographical ties and their self-improvement could be seen as a means to strengthening their own class and sense of identity, rather than a means to move upwards. The musical activities and skills with which they engaged and collaborated were a key element in that solidarity and building of new identity.

## CONCLUSION

Taste in culture is a marker of class and superiority, separating out the 'high' from the 'low,' the sacred from the profane and the 'legitimate' from the popular. Taste is the expression of, and at the same time shapes, *habitus*, making one's own taste seem natural and leading to feelings of distaste at the taste of those from different social milieux.<sup>85</sup> Social classes with more cultural and economic capital seek to impose their hierarchy of taste on

<sup>75</sup> Humphrey Southall, 2009, *A Vision of Britain through Time*. [www.visionofbritain.org.uk/index.jsp](http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/index.jsp) Accessed 28.9.11.

<sup>76</sup> McEwen, "The Newcastle Coalmining District", 216-217.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> Colin Heywood, "Conceptualizing change" in T. C. W. Blanning *The Nineteenth Century: Europe 1789-1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 54.

<sup>80</sup> David Swartz, *Culture and Power: the Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 99.

<sup>81</sup> Bourdieu cited in *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>82</sup> Docherty, *Newcastle*, 16.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>84</sup> McEwen, "The Newcastle Coalmining District", 49.

<sup>85</sup> Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 56.

those with less capital.<sup>86</sup> Because *habitus* tends to reproduce itself across the generations, being formed through social conditioning and reinforced through education, the dominant group's views are generally accepted as the proper type and legitimised.<sup>87</sup> In Australia's major cities during the 1870s, there were signs of bifurcation of taste, aided by venues made expressly for popular entertainment, such as the music halls opened in Melbourne by George Coppin and Joseph Simmons, and those for more elite audiences, such as the 1855 Theatre Royal in Melbourne.<sup>88</sup> However, such separation into venues for high and low status performances was not possible in Newcastle, a smaller regional centre, where the middle classes were in the minority. The upper and middle classes were culturally successful in the industrial North of England, in spite of being a relatively small fraction of society in the nineteenth century, because of the population size and infrastructure of the main cities, such as Newcastle upon Tyne. There, high status music and theatre events coexisted with more popular forms of entertainment such as music hall and variety.

Variety, minstrel shows and popular low status entertainment became the hallmark of the Victoria's seasons from mid 1876. By 1877, the expectation of variety in entertainment generally was such that the *Newcastle Morning Herald* even suggested that the only remaining 'high status' performances – those by the Choral Unions – should enliven their programmes by the addition of comic songs!<sup>89</sup> High status art music was heard less frequently in public concerts or as part of entertainment but instead was pushed into the private sphere, taught by musicians such as Herr Becker and his pupils in turn. In fact, art music became the underground music of late nineteenth century Newcastle.

With the commercialisation of public entertainment and the need for larger audiences, the population of Newcastle, N. S. W. (around 20,000 in the mid 1870s) could not support the breadth of cultural styles and taste seen in Newcastle upon Tyne and Australian cities like Melbourne and Sydney. Newspaper reports show that the middle classes sought control of the cultural environment, trying to bolster class distinctions through a hierarchy of taste. However, the demographic of Newcastle did not support such a hierarchy. Working classes were an overwhelming majority and thus were able to exercise control in public entertainment where their numbers were needed as audience. In the private sphere they were able to find self-validation through their own institutions and cultural activities.

---

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 1-2.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 386-7.

<sup>88</sup> Richard Waterhouse, *From Minstrel Show to Vaudeville* (Kensington: University of New South Wales Press, 1990), 28; Whiteoak, "Popular music", 529.

<sup>89</sup> *NMH*, "Choral Union Concert", 6 June 1877, 2. 'The concert ... was, in every sense, a success. The hall was comfortably filled with a highly respectable and appreciative audience. ... If there was any fault to be found, it lay in the entire absence of the comic element, which is not a wise thing in concerts of this kind, as nothing takes so well as variety.'